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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000131

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SUBJECT: THE YUNNAN CONNECTION: ISLAM, TRADE, FAMILY SUSTAIN LINKS
TO CHINA

REF: A. A) CHIANG MAI 4 (UPHEAVAL IN CHIANG MAI ISLAMIC COMMITTEE WORRIES AUTHORITIES)

[1](#)B. B) CHIANG MAI 117 (NORTHERN MUSLIMS CULTIVATE MODERATE IMAGE)

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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Northern Thai Muslim families with roots in China's Yunnan province play a significant role in the local economy and cross-border trade. Known throughout the region as "Jin Haw", this group's heritage as caravan traders manifests itself today in religious, commercial, historical and family links throughout the Burma-Thailand-Laos-China quadrangle. Yunnanese Muslims have used family connections in northern Thailand to secure limited slots on the hajj pilgrimage. End summary

[1](#)2. (U) In recent years as northern Thai Chinese became more financially and politically able to travel to China and send their children to Mandarin courses, old connections with Yunnan reemerged. One prominent Chiang Mai family that includes the current chairman of the Provincial Islamic Committee (PIC) has uncovered its family relationship with Ming dynasty explorer Zheng He. Others have helped their Chinese relatives travel to Saudi Arabia, taking advantage of Thailand's higher quota for hajj pilgrims.

[1](#)3. (SBU) [In addition to Muslims who began arriving from Yunnan in the 19th century, the colloquial designation "Jin Haw" includes Chinese Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) troops who came to Thailand through Burma after the 2nd World War, spearheaded by the KMT's 93rd Division. The two groups live in many of the same border communities; officials and others see no religious or ideological contradiction in this combination and are quick to connect Yunnanese of all types with drug trafficking and other illicit activities.]

The Road to Mecca

[1](#)4. (SBU) According to Praman Mooktaree, a member of both the Chiang Mai PIC and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand, Saudi authorities permit 10,000-12,000 Thai Muslims to make the hajj each year, a number that is reportedly more generous than the number of slots allocated to Chinese Muslims. Praman explained that Yunnanese Muslims unable to get in on the Chinese quota had for some time been traveling to Mecca through Chiang Mai and Bangkok. (Thai government contacts cite reports from Chinese authorities that some 100 Chinese Muslims per year cross the Burma border at Mae Sai under the pretext of pilgrimage.)

[1](#)5. (SBU) Last year, Saudi authorities tightened up on this practice, allowing only a hundred pilgrims to continue on to Saudi Arabia while a disappointed thousand more cooled their

heels in Thailand. Praman claimed that most of the successful pilgrims traveled under the care of a non-profit hajj operator who worked with the Chiang Mai PIC to screen for those with family or kinship ties in northern Thailand. He blamed the crackdown on overly profit-oriented Thai hajj operators, whose focus on business made them less credible to the Saudi officials.

Roots of the Muslim Jin Haw Community

16. (U) The current chairman of the PIC, Palangkun Wongluekiat, is the grandson of a Muslim Yunnanese caravan trader who moved to Chiang Mai in 1905 and built a house that was used to unload goods and rest pack animals from China. The house, which still stands today across from the Ban Haw mosque a block from the Night Bazaar, combines Chinese courtyard architecture with Thai stilt construction. A large wooden plaque with the Chinese family name is flanked by pictures of the King of Thailand and the Kaaba in Mecca.

17. (U) This family, whose photo is displayed in Yunnan's Zheng He museum as the Thailand branch of the explorer's descendants, secured a position in Chiang Mai life as successful merchants and good citizens, donating land for the airport and eventually being awarded a title by the King and the Thai family name of Wongluekiat. In keeping with its origins, the house environs where mule caravans once unloaded is now a parking area for stalls from Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar.

Caravans to Tour Buses

18. (U) Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar, beloved of tourists, had its origins in a small trading post set up by Muslims from Yunnan fleeing the suppression of a rebellion there in the 19th century. By the late 1890s, Muslim Yunnanese communities were established in Chiang Mai and other urban centers of north Thailand as well as in more remote rural areas. Known as Ban Haw (or Ho), the area adjacent to the Night Bazaar hosts a

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weekly Yunnanese market in the compound of the century-old Wongluekiat house. Villagers from Fang's Ban Yang mosque as well as other communities travel every Friday to sell vegetables and other goods at this market.

19. (SBU) Yunnanese Thai Muslims are woven throughout northern Thai commerce, especially in Chiang Mai city and in cross-border trade at Mae Sai. The president of Mae Sai's Al Nur Mosque is one of the wealthiest men in town, thanks to his trade interests along the Mekong, through Burma's Wa region and into China. The largest locally based tour company in Chiang Mai, Standard Tour, is run by a Yunnanese Muslim family that specializes in trips to China and Taiwan as well as bringing mainland and Taiwan tourists to northern Thailand. Company head Songwit Itthipattanakul has served as chairman of both the Chiang Mai and national Yunnanese Associations. His inauguration last year as chairman of the Tourism Business Association of Chiang Mai was attended by the entire staff of the Chinese Consulate as well as by top government and Thai Rak Thai (TRT) leaders. Songwit is considered the province's leading Yunnanese businessman and reportedly played a behind-the-scenes role in last year's controversial PIC election, which saw his fellow Yunnanese Muslim Palangkun Wongluekiat -- in alliance with TRT MP Pakorn Buranupakorn, a non-Muslim -- win the PIC chairmanship over the previous chairman, an Imam of Bengali descent (ref a).

Mosque Remains Predominantly Chinese

110. (U) Chiang Mai's central Ban Haw mosque is a center for Muslims from Yunnan; an estimated 70 percent of the members are of Chinese ancestry. A municipal historical marker on the main road of the Night Bazaar reads, "In the time of King

Inthawichayanon (1870-1897), a group of Ho Chinese settled here and built the mosque 'Hidayatun' in 1887 as the center of their community."

¶11. (U) Another prominent Chiang Mai mosque, Attaqwa, features pictures of Kunming as well as Mecca and displays the mosque name in Chinese as well as Arabic, Thai and English. Students at the mosque's school study both Chinese and Arabic. Farther north in Fang at a rural mosque headed by a Yunnan-born Imam, a two-classroom school teaches Thai, Arabic, English and Chinese.

Comment: Integration and Identity

¶12. (U) Many Yunnanese Muslims in northern Thailand have married non-Muslim Thais, adopted Thai names, and attended Thai-language and even Christian schools. They are usually grouped - often in a negative connection with the infamous drug trade that gave this border region its Golden Triangle reputation -- with the KMT troops and civilians who moved into northern Thailand after the Communist takeover of the mainland; in fact many of the newcomers from Yunnan moved into the communities of the earlier Muslim settlers. Despite this successful integration, the community retains a distinctive identity, with prominent mosques, schools, special foods and even a city historical market.

¶13. (U) During the visit of Thai-American Imam Rahmat Phyakul to Mae Sai (ref b), the mosque president called for a volunteer to recite the opening chapter of the Koran in a Yunnanese accent, to complement the Thai, American, and Middle Eastern-accented recitations just completed. Although initially reluctant, the young man who answered the call clearly found new pride in his native roots through this action, exclaiming afterward "I grew up with a Thai accent, I studied to develop a Middle Eastern style, but this is the first time I've recited with a Yunnan accent." The Imam explained that "This is the first time in our lives to listen to the recitation in Yunnanese accent. It brought happiness and peace to our hearts."
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